

**STATEMENT OF
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UNDERSECRETARY, NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ENVIRONMENT
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Concerning

S. 2724

**Before the
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate**

February 24, 2010

Chairwoman Boxer and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today to present the Administration's views on S. 2724, legislation that would amend the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, enacted in 2000, to continue environmental restoration activities in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Lake Tahoe and the surrounding national forests are national and international treasures. The lake is one of the largest, deepest, and clearest in the world. However, the lake is threatened by land disturbance on public and private land, transportation patterns, and climate change. I want to thank the bill's sponsors for their continued focus and support of the restoration activities in the Lake Tahoe Basin as one of their top priorities.

The Administration supports the goals of S. 2724, a bill that aligns with Secretary Vilsack's national vision for America's forests. We note that the bill addresses activities that can be addressed by existing authorities but underscores the unique status of Lake Tahoe. Secretary Vilsack's vision acknowledges the need for a complete commitment to forest restoration through an all-lands approach. This all-lands approach has been successfully implemented over the past 10 years in the Lake Tahoe Basin through a shared restoration vision by Federal, State, tribal, regional, local, and private entities operating under the 2000 Act. S. 2724 is also consistent with one of the four strategic priorities reflected in the President's FY 2011 budget request for USDA to ensure that National Forest System lands, which comprise 75% of the Lake Tahoe Basin, along with State and private lands are conserved, restored, and made more resilient to changing climate conditions, while working to restore and protect the waters of Lake Tahoe.

The bill would authorize \$415 million over 8 years to combat invasive species and restoring habitat for threatened species, such as the Lahontan cutthroat trout, improve water clarity, reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire, and restore the environment. The bill would

continue the funding, planning, and implementing of significant environmental restoration and forest management activities that are consistent with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's land and resource management plan, such as: prescribed burning for ecosystem health, treating hazardous fuels to reduce the chance of catastrophic wildfires, restoring stream environment zones, enhancing watersheds and wildlife habitats.

Under the 2000 Act, the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit has developed staff capability and capacity to coordinate and support to administer the federal share of the local erosion control grant program. We offer to continue that administrative role for the projects listed under Section 6(c)(1) of the bill involving local erosion control projects and we are willing to perform the same administrative role for State projects under Section 6(c)(1)(2) , as well as for the environmental restoration priority projects under Section 8 of the bill. We would like to work with the Committee to clarify our role in administering grants.

Section 6(c)(3)(iv) of the bill would make funds available for restoration work triggered by the Angora fire. The bill emphasizes the national forest transit program and coordination with State and local public transit systems. The bill would direct the Secretary to submit a report to Congress regarding the management of land in the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit Urban Lots Program to identify any obstacles to desired conveyances or interchanges. The bill also provides for continued federal agency coordination recognizing that we accomplish more by integrating our agency missions and resources to address needed restoration, appropriate science, and public outreach and education. Under Section 6(c)(3)(A)(ii), the bill would authorize the Secretary to award competitive grants to communities for fuels work.

The Forest Service has had a critical role in coordinating and leading the Federal Partnership established under Executive Order 13057 to implement meaningful actions at Lake Tahoe to improve water quality, transportation, forest management, recreation and tourism, and to protect Lake Tahoe's environment. The agency is willing to continue that role.

Some examples of the types of projects carried out under the 2000 Act include:

Vegetation and Fuels Management projects. From 2006 to 2008 the Forest Service spent \$16.7 million of Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act funds and \$1.68 million of appropriated funds on vegetation and fuels management activities in the highest priority area of the Basin - the Wildland Urban Interface zone. The Forest Service Stewardship Fireshed Assessment and the Lake Tahoe Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy, completed in December 2007, helped improve coordination among 16 partner agencies doing fuels reduction work throughout the Basin. The Forest Service provided more than \$2.63 million in funding to California and Nevada between 2006 and 2008 to assist completion of fuel reduction treatments identified in the Strategy.

Erosion Control projects. The Forest Service has awarded funds to local governments for urban storm water treatment and erosion control projects on the Environmental Improvement Program list for FY06, FY07, and FY08. The funding amount for administration and grant awards

was \$10 million for each fiscal year and grantees included Placer, El Dorado, Washoe, and Douglas Counties, City of South Lake Tahoe, South Tahoe Public Utility District and Nevada Tahoe Conservation District. The Forest Service grants funded portions or phases of 34 different projects designed to reduce pollutants from urban storm water runoff. These projects include both planning and implementation for storm water capture and treatment improvements, slope stabilization and revegetation, and stream and floodplain restoration.

Habitat Restoration. In FY 2009, a \$250,000 Lahontan Cutthroat Trout Restoration/Recovery project included ongoing stocking, monitoring, and research, conducted in partnership with the community of Fallen Leaf Lake, the Forest Service, and the California Department of Fish and Game. These efforts were a key factor in substantially increasing overall reintroduction success in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

As a result of these types of projects, and other priority work conducted in the Lake Tahoe Basin, the rate of decline in water clarity of the lake has decreased, thousands of acres of forest lands have been restored, roads and highways across the basin have been improved to limit runoff, and the natural function of many miles of stream zones and riparian areas has been restored.

We appreciate and embrace the roles assigned to Secretary Vilsack as we continue to complete ongoing and new restoration activities and strategically address new environmental challenges, such as dealing with aquatic invasive species that threaten Lake Tahoe and its surrounding waters.

In conclusion, this bill would build upon the success of the past 10 years. It would focus the next 8 years on environmental restoration activities that align with the Secretary's vision for America's forests. The Administration remains committed to restoring the health and resiliency of the Lake Tahoe Basin. We will continue to seek joint solutions that serve the community, economy, and the environment.

I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have at this time.